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SUBJECT: TURKEY: LOCAL CONTACTS IN SOUTHEAST REPORT BUSINESS IS
BRISK AT HABUR GATE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Local contacts in the Southeast say sustained pressure from the business community and high-level interest in Ankara has led to increased capacity and efficiency of operations at the Turkey-Iraq border crossing at Habur Gate. From October 2008 to January 2009, Habur Gate's daily vehicular traffic has increased from about 800 trucks a day to 3,000. This improvement has reduced the round trip for Turkish trucks carrying export goods from 21 to 5 days, a great boon to local business and the transportation industry. END SUMMARY.

A STAGNANT HABUR GATE CHOKES AREA BUSINESSES

¶2. (SBU) Cizre Chamber of Commerce President Adnan Elci told us that, as recently as October 2008, Habur Gate operations were nearly stagnant due to inefficient vehicle processing procedures and a critical shortage of platform and customs personnel. Out of 12 total outbound lanes or processing platforms, only four were operational during the day, and three at night. The inbound lanes were staffed only by three registry clerks, Elci said, and were causing up to 15-day delays on the Iraqi side. Elci contended the toll on area businesses was devastating, as the practical result of these conditions resulted in a Turkish trucker being able to make only one round trip per month. An October communique from the Chamber of Commerce to the Sirnak governor lamented the paltry number of vehicles passing in a 24-hour period - about 800 - and recommended maximizing platform usage to a minimum of ten inbound and outbound, adding 80 customs officials and anti-narcotics officers, and purchasing X-ray machines for the inbound platforms.

PRESSURE FROM UP HIGH AND DOWN LOW BRINGS CHANGE

¶3. (SBU) With mounting pressure from the business community, including the Diyarbakir Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (DISIAD), the Federation of East and Southeast

Anatolian Industrialists and Businessmen (DOGUNSIFED), and the Turkish-Arab Businessmen's Association (TURAB), high-level officials in Ankara began looking into the matter of Habur personally. DISIAD President Raif Turk told us he had pressed the issue with a number of senior officials, including State Minister Kursat Tuzmen, who quickly tasked Turkish Exporters Assembly General Secretary Mehmet Buyueksi with tracking the issue and filing a daily status report. Turk also said Diyarbakir Governor Huseyin Avni Mutlu, who had earlier served as governor in Sirnak, played a role in bringing about positive changes. Thanks to the efforts of NGOs, Turk said additional employees had been added to Habur, which had increased the number of operational platforms and overall efficiency.

¶4. (SBU) Elci echoed Turk's comments, noting before December 31, 2008, the "TIR Park," or the area where trucks queue up to travel into Iraq, had been operated by the Transporters' Cooperative. Now both the land and the operations, which are owned by Sirnak province, have reverted to central government control. Elci confirmed 20 platforms are now operational in Habur, ten inbound and ten outbound, reducing round-trip time for trucks heading into northern Iraq to one week or less. TURAB members corroborated press reports that approximately 3,000 trucks are now processed each way, and said the bustling Habur operations were contributing to a surge in trade and commerce, which is particularly vital during this economic slump.

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COMMENT

¶5. (SBU) As Elci pointed out, the ongoing rapprochement among Turkey, Iraq and the KRG has doubtless played a significant role in bringing about a more efficient Habur Gate. The GOT reportedly spent some \$33 million dollars upgrading Habur a few years ago, only to contract operations to about 20% of the daily vehicle load handled in the Saddam era. Business is now brisk not only for commercial businesses and the transportation industry, but for local restaurants and hotels as well. The manager of Silopi's new Grand Hotel, the closest lodging to Habur that opened its doors less than five months ago, reports a 70% occupation rate during weekdays and says business is great. While happy about the boon to the local economy, more cynical contacts maintain that NGOs and businesses have been vocal for years about Habur's shortcomings, and say it's no coincidence the improvements came just a few months before the local elections. Timing is everything in local politics. END COMMENT.
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